



Strengthening Women's Advocacy in Russia: The NIS-US Women's Consortium

Administered by Winrock International

The pursuit of public advocacy was virtually impossible under the Communist regime in the former Soviet Union. Despite the fact that advocacy is critical at a time when regressive political forces and economic instability threaten emerging democratic movements in the Newly Independent States (NIS), including Russia, civil society remains at an early stage of development. Mechanisms to include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the country's formal policymaking dialogue are virtually absent; moreover, government officials are often unwilling to listen to advocates. At the same time, the capacity of NGOs to channel citizen participation to influence public policy remains extremely limited.

Coalitions of women's NGOs hold great promise as advocates and agents of change. The NIS-US Women's Consortium is a membership organization that aims to increase women's participation and influence in economic, political, civic, and community life in the NIS. The Consortium has evolved from a fledgling coalition in 1992 to an active international organization: as of November 1998, it had more than 200 member NGOs and 11 individual advisors. The Russian office of the Consortium represents 98 independent member organizations from 35 regions of the country. It serves its members through information dissemination, networking, and technical assistance. During the 1997-98 project period, the Consortium focused on increasing the ability of Russian women's NGOs to launch advocacy campaigns on issues identified as crucial to advancing women's legal, economic, and social status.

Objectives

Specific project objectives were to:

- ▶ Increase input from women's NGOs on upcoming federal legislation;
- ▶ Increase regional women's participation in national advocacy campaigns;
- ▶ Broaden the network of women's NGOs involved in advocacy;
- ▶ Increase cross-sectoral advocacy coalitions with women's participation;
- ▶ Strengthen the clearinghouse function of the Consortium;
- ▶ Increase the visibility of women's NGOs in Russia.

Advocacy Design

Given the adverse political environment of the Communist State Duma (lower house of Parliament), the Consortium focused its advocacy efforts on "first stage" activities:

increasing access to documents and officials; improving information flow between the government and NGO sector; and stimulating regional participation in central government

decisionmaking processes. While legislative change was deemed an unrealistic goal for a one-year project, activities were designed to help women activists become more

savvy about advocacy and to learn the mechanics of the process.

The Consortium focused on issues affecting women—such as microcredit, electoral law, domestic violence, and reproductive health—utilizing a variety of methods:

- ▶ Meetings with high-level federal and regional policymakers for Consortium staff, members, and other women's NGOs;
- ▶ Collaboration with government bodies tasked with women's issues;¹
- ▶ Access to key governmental documents including draft legislation, budgets, and official reports which the Consortium disseminates to its member organizations;
- ▶ Strategy sessions and issue forums to promote the importance of advocacy itself and develop gender-sensitive positions on topics identified by members;
- ▶ Participation in issue forums and planning meetings hosted by NGOs in other sectors to strengthen cross-sectoral coalitions.

Advocacy Activities

The following activities contributed to the achievement of the six objectives.

Increasing Input on Federal Legislation

The Consortium held 23 strategy sessions with its members preceding meetings of key government committees on women's affairs or other events held by other women's NGOs. Five of these sessions were held in preparation for meetings of the Interagency Commission to Improve the Status of Women, which was created as part of the post-Beijing Russian national "Plan for Action."² As a result, these sessions proposed the establishment of gender expertise committees to review all draft legislation on social issues.³

Another eight sessions were held in conjunction with meetings of the Presidential Commission on Women, the Family, and Demography. These sessions covered topics such as domestic violence, reproductive rights and health, drug abuse, rural

women, and orphans. Four strategy sessions were also held concurrently with Duma hearings on the Committee on Women, the Family, and Youth.⁴ Through their close collaboration on these commissions, Consortium staff and members increased the visibility of women's NGOs as a social force and actively participated in policymaking.

However, the Consortium did not succeed in getting the stalled reproductive health bill back on the agenda for discussion in the Duma, or in suggesting new draft domestic violence or microcredit legislation. This is not surprising in light of the conservatism of the Duma and lack of Consortium advocacy efforts targeted at legislative change in regional (Oblast) Dumas. The Consortium was well aware of these difficulties but continued to work with deputies whenever feasible. The limited progress at this ambitious level of change underscores the nascent state of advocacy efforts in Russia.

Increasing Regional Women's Participation

Prior to and following its strategy sessions, the Consortium tried to bolster monitoring of the local implementation of federal programs by women's NGOs by disseminating advocacy alerts and other necessary information on the meeting agendas of commissions and various Duma Committees. The alerts provided regional women's NGOs with an opportunity to participate in federal advocacy campaigns on targeted issues at the local level.

Over the one-year period, the Consortium disseminated 10 advocacy alerts and numerous other announcements to more than 100 women's NGOs and approximately 150 other NGOs, working in areas such as human rights and microfinance. The Consortium's e-mail advocacy network has approximately 60 subscribers, many of whom represent membership associations that forward the information received to additional

¹ Such bodies included the Presidential Commission on Women, the Family, and Demography; the Duma Committee on Women, Family, and Youth; and the Interagency Commission to Improve the Status of Women.

² The Russian Federation signed the Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and approved its own plan the following year. Since then, women's NGOs have been monitoring progress to ensure that the changes agreed to are made.

³ The then Commission Chair agreed to establish gender expertise committees, but he has since been replaced, forcing the Consortium to begin advocating anew on the subject.

⁴ One of these sessions on the proposed bioethics law—a thinly veiled attempt to restrict women's reproductive rights—was particularly important given the strength of the opposition lobby in the Duma and the politically active Orthodox Church.

groups. For instance, the Consortium helped disseminate an action alert from the Center for Democracy and Human Rights and the State Duma Committee on NGO Affairs urging all NGOs to contact deputies asking them to vote against proposed changes to the tax code.⁵

Broadening the Women's Network

In addition to holding many informal strategy sessions, the Consortium organized six formal issue forums with 115 participants:

- ▶ More than 40 Russian Consortium members attended an international forum in Kiev, Ukraine, on such global trends as the sex trafficking of women abroad. The gathering facilitated contacts between U.S. Consortium member MiraMed, which works actively on the issue, and interested Russian parties in six regions.
- ▶ Women's NGOs developed and articulated a clear position on President Yeltsin's proposed electoral law changes at a forum in Moscow, which would have changed the existing mixed electoral system—in which half of the candidates to the Duma are elected as single-district candidates and the remainder are elected from party lists—to a unified, single-district candidate system. This shift (which was not adopted) would have undermined the power of political parties, given an unfair advantage to wealthy would-be politicians, and negatively impacted the ability of women to gain elected office.
- ▶ A two-day forum in Ufa (in the Russian state of Bashkortostan) with representatives from the state Association of Women Entrepreneurs explored gender in

politics and the importance of advocacy. As a result, the association became one of the most active members of the Consortium and its president was appointed to the Republic Committee for Small Business Development.

- ▶ Three forums on microcredit in Russia, held in Moscow and St. Petersburg, attracted national and international participants who advocated that more research on microcredit models was necessary before a concept paper could be drafted outlining necessary legislative changes in Russia. Further, these participants successfully lobbied Women's World Banking and the Ford Foundation to fund a pilot project enabling Russian businesswomen's associations to offer microcredit under existing conditions.

Increasing Cross-sectoral Advocacy Coalitions

The issue forums described above attracted new participants to Consortium advocacy efforts, including NGOs focused on youth advocacy, microfinance, and the law. By inviting interested parties from outside the women's movement to its strategy sessions and issue forums, as well as attending events staged by other groups on topics concerning women, the Consortium fostered better integration of women's groups throughout the greater NGO community. This increased the chance of success of *all* NGO advocacy campaigns.

Strengthening the Clearinghouse Function

To communicate its work to non-member NGOs and the women's movement in general, the Consortium continued to disseminate issue

forum notes and other advocacy materials by e-mail and fax. This work was greatly strengthened by a Ford Foundation grant to provide modems and e-mail training to 35 Consortium members across Russia. The Consortium network continued to reach 100 additional women's NGOs and 150 other groups.

The Consortium continued its long-established practice of making key publications available to the Russian NGO community. For example, to complement its advocacy activities on prevention of domestic violence, the Consortium sought and received a grant from the U.S. Information Service to publish and distribute 3,000 copies of an updated edition of the landmark Russian book *Crisis Centers for Women: Experience in Setup and Operation*. The Consortium also published the second edition of *International Conventions and Declarations on the Rights of Women and Children* compiled by Russian Consortium members.

Increasing the Visibility of Women's NGOs

The final issue forum report that presented advocacy achievements and lessons learned was published in February 1999 in both Russian and English and distributed widely to the NGO community in Russia, the media, and donor institutions. This dissemination aimed to ensure that as wide an audience as possible would be exposed to the alternative positions advocated by Consortium members and their partners on a variety of issues.

Conclusions

The Consortium successfully met its objectives and broadened the number of topics on which it worked, thus increasing its credibility

⁵ These legislative changes would have required NGOs to pay taxes on services they received and to charge taxes on services they provide to clients. A compromise was eventually reached, which eliminated the clause negatively affecting NGOs.

and resulting in a greater degree of collaboration with a more diverse range of government officials. It reinforced that women's NGOs can have an impact on public opinion, the

policy-making process, and the implementation of laws. The Consortium measured its success in terms of increased NGO activism, blocked legislation that would have negatively

affected women, and the introduction of gender-sensitive legislative language, rather than in terms of legislation actually adopted or increased funding for existing programs.

Recommendations and Lessons Learned

The following recommendations for the Consortium emerged from project experiences:

► **Invest in more than paper flow.** Given the expense and difficulties of communications in Russia, if Consortium members can no longer afford their e-mail activities or if bilateral communication between the staff in Moscow and regional members breaks down, the credibility and authority of the Consortium will decrease and its advocacy efforts will become unsustainable. The Consortium should therefore continue to provide support in the form of training, consultations, and communications resources to enable regional women's groups to participate fully in national advocacy campaigns.

► **Work with the regional Duma.** The head of the Presidential Commission on Women, the Family, and Demography advised the Consortium in 1997 to work at the regional level until a new State Duma could be elected in December 1999. Since

the current Duma does not appear receptive to the Consortium's advocacy, the coalition should formulate its campaigns at the regional level, working with local women's NGOs.

The following lessons can be applied to similar advocacy activities outside of Russia:

► **Recognition comes before message content.** The absence of media coverage and interest of legislators and officials in working jointly with NGOs is a major impediment to the success of advocacy campaigns. NGOs must first convince journalists and officials that they are important social players with whom collaboration is desirable, and then address the importance of specific women's issues.

► **Realistic expectations for pace and degree of change are essential.** Advocacy is time-consuming work that is highly sensitive to political and economic crises. The result is often two steps forward, one

step back. It is best to analyze which factors are beyond one's control, such as the rapid turnover of political appointees, and adjust an advocacy strategy to focus on factors that are more in tune with the campaign's influence. These could include contact with the media or rank and file members of legislative committees.

► **The issue must determine the approach.** While using the same approach on all issues effectively increases access to policymakers, improves information dissemination, and diversifies participation during the first stage of advocacy, specific aspects of each issue determine which target audiences are most appropriate and from which quarters to expect opposition. It is useful to combine advocacy training (including sessions on choosing an audience, formulating messages, selecting a medium, opening the right doors, launching a dialogue, and collaboration) with specific issue forums in order to ensure maximum participation.

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